The "Book of Nature"

Connecting Science and Wisdom

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Rondinara explores the reality of nature, both in its totality and in its essence, from different perspectives. In so doing, he discusses how Chiara Lubich envisions nature in relation to God and humankind. First, he examines the God-nature relation as Chiara understood it, as both immanent and transcendent. Then, he turns to Chiara's notion of nature as an ongoing "event" in history leading to the recapitulation of all things in God. Chiara sees this theo-logical interpretation of nature as being not in conflict with other interpretations from philosophy and science but in dialogue with them. Rondinara concludes with today's environmental crisis, where this approach is vital. He presents Chiara's call for a change in our relation to nature based on a dialogical reading of the "Book of Nature."

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Few concepts are so rich in meaning and at the same time so open to a diversity of interpretations as is "nature." "Nature" refers to the immense reality in which every thing and person exists and of which they constitute an integral part. It is precisely this reality of nature that I will discuss, tracing briefly some of its characteristics as Chiara Lubich experienced and understood them in her lifetime.

The term "nature" generally refers to all existing things, with particular regard to their objective configuration and their essential constitutive principles. This connection between totality and essentiality—as the etymology of the word "nature" suggests[1]—is also found in Chiara's reflections. Their deeply theological character must be understood not so much as human speech about God and the divine mystery but in their proper meaning as a subjective genitive—a word that is both noun and verb.[2] In language that seems ordinary, her texts shine with clarity and incisiveness. They offer God's vision of things and of the natural world, a contemplative gaze that—metaphorically speaking—comes from the "eyes of

1. The term "nature" comes from the Latin *nasci* (to be born), which corresponds to the Greek verb φύειν (to be generated). All things, when born, reach their fulfillment according to their own immanent characteristics.

2. We can grasp the power of such a subjective genitive, understood as a word pronounced by God, via semantic considerations. Although in the context of Greek thought the verb φύω denotes the emergence and blossoming of nature, from a Christian perspective, nature, as a created reality, is an expression of God's Word (see Gn 1), the Word pronounced by the Father through Christ (see Col 1:16). In this regard, St. Anselm of Canterbury affirms that: "By one and the same Word, he expresses himself and what he has made." In this perspective, concerning the realities of nature, inasmuch as they are created, it is true that "if he expresses himself and what he creates, by a Word consubstantial with himself, it is manifest that of the Word by which he expresses himself, and of the Word by which he expresses the created world, the substance is one" (*Monologion,* 33).

God." This gaze penetrates the reality of nature to settle on all the objects in the world.

It is a theo-logical vision then, but one not limited to a particular faith. On the contrary, Chiara's reflections have aroused deep interest in members of non-Christian cultures and religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, traditions where Chiara has personally recounted episodes of her own understanding of nature. In this vision the reality of nature is centered on the traditional Judeo-Christian concept of *creation* inasmuch as it comes from God, out of love, emerging from nothing and bearing the mark of the Trinity. Creation is also present in Christ Jesus, and in a special way, is present in the light of the paschal event.

Such theological discourse on the reality of nature is very timely. It is a topic that, although rarely made explicit, constitutes the background for many issues in contemporary culture. Consider the path mapped out by contemporary philosophy, starting with Nietzsche, progressing through Heidegger, and finally reaching contemporary authors, though in a somewhat reductive form. These philosophers consider the interaction between the doctrine of creation out of nothing and the Greek metaphysics of being—as opposed to becoming—to be the cause of the nihilism that characterizes Western culture. Consider also the continuous and reciprocal questioning—often clear and ingenious—between Christian theology and the natural sciences that shapes arguments concerning boundary issues affecting scientific cosmology, evolutionary biology, paleoanthropology, and the human dimensions of environmental issues.

God-Nature Relationship

According to Chiara, the first element of her vision of the reality of nature pertains to the God-nature relationship. For her, this relationship is expressed in strict accordance with the great figures of the theological and mystical tradition, such as Thomas Aquinas and Hildegard of Bingen. But it also lines up with the public religious thought of a modern thinker and scientist such as Isaac Newton. Her understanding of the God-nature relationship is consistent with Thomas Aquinas's theological reflection on creation, which states that God dwells in the world as the soul in the body, that is, by his presence, power, and essence.[3] It is also consistent with Hildegard of Bingen's mystical concept that the God-nature connection does not contradict their constitutive diversity. In fact, for Hildegard, the certainty that God is immanent in the cosmos—as well as transcendent—grants creation the ability to interact with and correspond to God since God is in nature and nature is in God. For this German mystic, the studies of both nature (what today we call the sciences) and mystical theology are important.

In harmony with these authors, Chiara goes beyond the apparent opposition between the transcendence and the immanence of God with created nature, overcoming and summarizing at the same time the two explanatory models that have prevailed in the history of religious thought:

- The model of God's immanence, which affirms the identification between God and the natural world;

3. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I, 8, 2a 3.

- The model of God's transcendence over creation, which affirms the transcendent nature, or noninvolvement, of God to the point, at times, of a clear separation between God and the natural world.

According to these models, God created existing reality from nothing, through a free act of love. God brought into existence something—the creature—that is not of the divine substance; hence God continually transcends it. Such transcendence, however, does not necessarily imply a distance but an immanent life-giving presence.

Chiara has written about her experience during the summer of 1949. She had journeyed from Rome to Tonadico in the Primiero Valley, nestled in the Dolomite Mountains, for some rest. In July of that year, immersed in an intense spiritual atmosphere, she discerned from the very beginning the presence of Someone beneath all things who, in her words, "made it so that they were not as—usually—we would see them."[4] It was the discovery of the presence of God beneath all things:

> I felt that I could perceive, perhaps because of a special grace from God, the presence of God beneath things. Therefore, if the pine trees were gilded by the sun, if the brooks flowed into the glimmering falls, if the daisies, other flowers and the sky were all decked in summer array, stronger than all this was the vision of a sun beneath all creation. In a certain sense, I saw, I believe, God who supports, who upholds things. . . . The vision of God beneath things, which gave unity to creation, was stronger than the things themselves; the unity of the whole was stronger than the distinction among them.[5]

This text, which echoes Colossians 1:16–17 and Romans 1:20, speaks of the presence of God in all of nature because of the conservation and the subsistence of all things in God. Chiara affirms clearly that where there is a natural element there is also God, distinct from its being but present in the very heart of being creatures. This "conservation" and "subsistence" from God does not interfere, according to Chiara's thought, with the normality proper to nature that scientists, for example, grasp and express in scientific laws. In fact, God is understood here as the First Cause that constantly acts in the world through secondary causes, that is, natural causes. In this concept, God is not a capricious cosmic agent acting on the course of the universe. Rather, God respects the freedom of creation to follow its own internal relationality. Nevertheless, this relationality does not constitute a straitjacket that limits or prevents God's action in the conservation of being. A God who did not continue to play an active role in the world would be in effect a God dead to the world.

Creation as Event

Also in this theological context, another element that characterizes Chiara's concept of the reality of nature is her notion of *creation* as *event*. Right when Chiara was writing the most beautiful and intense reflections on her understanding of this notion, the theology of that period was rediscovering, through the studies of

4. Chiara Lubich, Unpublished Talk at Castel Gandolfo, December 20, 1999.

5. Ibid.

Antonin-Dalmace Sertillanges, that *creation* is not only an action of God, or the reality produced by such an act, but a relation. That is why, according to Sertillanges, "the creation [of human beings] has an immanent character and not transcendent, although the cause is transcendent."[6] This relational character of the concept of creation has its biblical foundation in Ephesians 1:3–10, where creation is understood as an *event*, a history of God with the world covering the entire range of divine action, starting from the formation of the cosmos, through the appearance of human persons and the salvific event of Christ, and arriving at the recapitulation of all things in God.

These two elements—the God-nature relationship and creation as event—are culturally relevant because they can properly guide the theological and philosophical reasoning informing boundary issues concerning the relationship between biological evolution and the principle of creation, and between the principle of creation and the theory of scientific cosmology about the beginnings of the universe. But these elements have another cultural significance. For men and women of this and the last century, the information obtained by the progress of scientific knowledge seems to have diminished our expectations concerning God's action in the world. These elements have the merit of reintroducing the question of whether God is truly and totally out of the world. This questioning offers the possibility that God has never abandoned the world, that God has not left creation at the mercy of creation itself, and that God's providential love is at work in every matter, lovingly accompanying it on its journey toward its Creator.

6. Antonin Dalmace Sertillanges, *L'idée de création et ses retentissements en philosophie* (Paris: Aubier, 1945), 120. Author's translation.

Unity of Knowledge

Chiara has always understood this theo-logical interpretation of the reality of nature, beyond its own value for the discipline of theology, as actively interacting with other epistemological interpretations of the natural world as carried out by humanity down through the centuries, thus giving value to its content. The rational understanding of the constituent elements of our world to which I will refer here developed throughout the history of Western culture in a variety of philosophical and theological directions. For four centuries, the scientific understanding has been added to the philosophical and theological. All are forms of autonomous and legitimate interpretation because of the different methods each employs. They are also formally distinct based on the different purposes each has assigned to the same act of cognition: philosophy oriented globally, theology organized according to divine revelation, and the natural sciences focused upon what is quantitatively relevant and circumstantial.

Using a metaphor from the fifteenth-century "Book of Nature," by the Catalan physician and philosopher Raymond of Sabunde,[7] in its intelligibility the book of nature may even support a theological reading in addition to the sapiential reading that philosophy has had since the beginning, and the mathematical reading that Galileo Galilei proposed in *The Assayer*.[8] These interpretations

7. Raymond of Sabunde, *Theologia naturalis: Sive liber creaturarum,* 1436.

8. "Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth" (*Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo,* trans. Stillman Drake [New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957], 238).

are not comparable one with the other, since what is affirmed by one cannot be said by the other. For this reason they are mutually complementary, and therefore – according to Lubich – these interpretations can best express their approach to truth and their truthful contents in a dialogical context.

This context of authentic dialogue aims to prevent the isolation of single fields of knowledge. Through appropriate philosophical mediation an indirect interaction among different fields of knowledge can be realized. It is a context in which proper interdisciplinary dialogue presumes that the quest for truth demands openness and acceptance of the position of others, requires each party to know and accept the differences and the specific contributions of the other, seeks what is common, and recognizes the interdependence of the parties. For Chiara, dialogue between the natural sciences, philosophy, and the knowledge of the faith[9]—that is, theology—is a way toward knowledge of the only reality and the only truth that can help the consciousness reach a unity of knowledge while safeguarding the epistemological conventions, and consequently the autonomy, of the various disciplines involved in this process.

In such an interdisciplinary process, science, natural philosophy, and theology would be protected from confusing their speech and their specific objects of investigation from excluding each other, and through welcoming mutual criticism would reach a joint hermeneutics[10] of knowledge. Here, the unity of knowledge finds its application, in the first instance, in the human person who is capable of a multifaceted, in-depth study of philosophical, scientific, and theological knowledge and research, and at the same time able to gather and develop their mutual stimuli. In the unity of the human person, interdisciplinary dialogue becomes possible. This dialogue becomes an intellectual lifestyle wherein the action of wisdom animates and produces scientific results.

Dialogue, Plato teaches, is the space in which the spark of truth is lit as the enlightenment of reality in its deepest sense. In his *Letter VII*, he expresses: "After much converse (*sunousía*) about the matter itself and a life lived together (*suzên*), suddenly a light, as it were, is kindled in one soul by a flame that leaps to it from another, and thereafter sustains itself."[11] The centrality of life in common together with the interplay between thought and practice in a dynamic interdisciplinary dialogue are the characteristic features of Chiara's formative epistemology,[12] which we experienced for many years in the course of our direct contact with her in the Abba School. Chiara established this School as an international cenacle of interdisciplinary study, a fact she confirmed in her own words on the day she founded her university, the Sophia University Institute. Hers is a formative epistemology in which the dynamics of the reciprocal giving and receiving of intellectual content and insights generates a new space in which the truth of all the various forms of knowledge can effectively meet and signal the path to wisdom.

9. Theology can be understood as a scientific knowledge—a critical knowledge of our trust in God—and at the same time as wisdom, as an understanding of the existential mystery of God for his benevolence and such trust.

10. Jean Ladrière, *L'Articulation du sens: Discours scientifique et parole de la foi* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), 78.

11. Plato, "The Seventh Letter, in *The Dialogues of Plato and the Seventh Letter*," trans. J. Harward (Chicago: William Benton, 1952), 809.

12. Formative epistemology, although starting through interdisciplinary dialogue, tends to a transdisciplinary position that can bring forth from the comparison of the individual disciplines new data that will be the point of connection between the disciplines themselves.

Environmental Questions

Let me conclude by presenting another area in which, according to Chiara, the theological understanding of nature can contribute to cultural development: the environment. The person-nature relationship today has assumed a critical configuration that has been given the name "environmental crisis." But this crisis leads us to consider a deeper crisis that affects the human person as a whole. It is essentially an *anthropological crisis*. This profound anthropological crisis is a wake-up call. It is a product of a specific conception of ourselves through which, in our laborious search for self-assertion, we appoint ourselves the absolute masters of nature and its destiny.

As such, the environmental crisis cannot be overcome by purely technical-scientific or economic measures because it is rooted in directives of the human spirit that have led Western civilization to take up certain *values* and *categories*. There cannot be genuine change without correcting these values and categories. The problems posed by the contemporary environmental crisis demand serious reflection on human action. In fact, human action presents itself both as the *cause* of our ecological problems and as the necessary *place* and *means* for their solution. Hence, ethical reflection is important because the environmental crisis is born of and identified with our own action on nature. Today, more than ever, a person-nature relationship renewed and conformed to the challenges launched by the environmental crisis must necessarily pass through the *recovery of the significance of the relationships that bind each of us to nature*.

It is through such a recovery that the concept of nature and its relationship with the human person achieves its cultural value, as expressed by Chiara in some unpublished personal notes written between 1949 and 1951. Let me point out that in these notes we do not find a systematic treatment of the problem. For one thing, this crisis had not yet emerged at that time, at least not in Italy, although Chiara indirectly touched upon it several times in various other contexts.

A focus of these notes is *the recovery of the original relationship*. In Chiara's writings, in accordance with biblical thought and Christian tradition, the person-nature relationship is not separate from the God-human and God-nature relationships. The relationship between humanity and nature is perceived from within the entire relationality present in creation. In several texts, such relationality is presented through the category "love." When she arrived in Tonadico of Primiero in July 1949, in her contact with a majestic natural scene such as that of the Dolomite Mountains, Chiara perceived love as the immanent law of nature, love as a qualitative factor that regulates the relationship among the natural elements. She writes:

> And the fact that God was beneath things meant that they weren't as we see them; they were all linked to one another by love; all, so to speak, in love with one another. So if the brook flowed into the lake it was out of love. If the pine tree stood high next to another pine tree, it was out of love.[13]

Here we have a vision of the reality of nature conceived in the light of a fullness and definitive character with an eschatological "flavor." Soon after she wrote:

13. Chiara Lubich, Unpublished Talk at Castel Gandolfo, December 20, 1999.

> I have been created as a gift for the person next to me, and the person next to me has been created by God as a gift for me. . . . On earth all stands in a relationship of love with all: each thing with each thing. We have to be Love, however, to discover the golden thread among all things that exist.[14]

We are dealing here with a religious vision of the reality of nature that can contribute to the recovery of the significance of the relationships that bind us to nature while establishing a *responsible ethos* toward nature itself. This natural vision involves reconciling the *value of nature* and *human creativity*, which we encounter daily. The value of recovering the original God-person-nature relationship is threefold:

- Nature is fully valued because its ultimate end is made known.
- The network of relationships that binds nature to us is valued as we acquire the consciousness that we are fellow travelers toward a common destiny.
- The creative role that the human person has toward nature is valued.

But Chiara says, "we must be Love," we must learn to understand each other not as oppressors, or as common biotic elements, but as conscious and responsible individuals who are part of nature and are fulfilled existentially through giving of ourselves, in implementing the gift-of-self to our fellow humans and to the natural reality of which we also are a part. This cultural challenge calls for a particular kind of person, an anthropological model for the most part still unknown. It requires moving from a predominantly individualistic perspective to a perspective of sharing in communion, from the perspective of a limited group to one of a global human family.

Chiara's way of forming a mature ecological awareness is therefore through *love*. This awareness consists not primarily in evaluating the ethical-moral dimensions of the ecological problem but in entering into a new perspective. One must acquire a perspective of *communion* (among human beings, with God, and with things) and *transfiguration*[15] that stimulates and awakens in each one the profound and mysterious dimension of human action. Once this process is internalized, ethics will emerge accordingly.

Therefore, according to this view, it is not so much a matter of defending and preserving nature, although this of course is also necessary. We need to make it more beautiful, to spiritualize and transfigure it. In other words, we need to lead nature to the final day, in accordance with God's design on us and on nature. For Chiara, these beliefs emanate not so much from deduction or thematic, abstract reasoning but from deep inner insights arising from her intimacy with God. These insights became a practice and lifestyle that inspired many aspects of her daily life.

In conclusion, Chiara Lubich's concept of nature emerges as a mystery of love beyond words that, despite its many forms of intelligibility, can never be fully expressed because it is closely linked to the mystery of humanity and of God.

14. Quoted by Callan Slipper, "Towards an Understanding of the Human Person According to the Mystical Experience of Chiara Lubich in the Paradise of '49," *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1 (2012): 30.

15. See Matthew 17:2: "And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." This passage presents a preview of how matter—called to its final glory—would be transformed, transfigured.

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